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S/elective belonging: how rural newcomer families with children become stayers

Tialda Haartsen and Aileen Stockdale¹

Abstract –

Rural stayers are often defined as people who have never left their rural home region or village. However, rural regions and villages also receive new inhabitants. This paper explores if and how newcomers become inhabitants who stay put. We interviewed couples of newcomers who moved to a rural area of the Netherlands at the family formation life stage, between 5 and 10 years prior to this study. We view the process of becoming a stayer through the lens of getting attached to and identifying with the new home region. We adopt the concepts of 'elective belonging' and 'selective belonging' to explore the newcomers' actual experiences of rural place and, in turn, the ways rural newcomer families become stayers. We identify two types of stayers: children-led and convinced stayers. Both envisage a re-negotiation of staying or leaving at a later life stage (either the empty nest or old age stage). They *elected to belong* to residential places in enchanted rural landscapes. But they also are *selective* in developing belonging to the rural.

INTRODUCTION

Rural regions and villages not only experience out-migration; they also receive new inhabitants motivated by positive rural idyllic representations of the rural. Halfacree & Rivera (2012) note that there is often a mismatch between these rural representations and rural reality. They call for more empirical research into 'why and how pro-rural migrants subsequently stay in their [rural] destinations' (Halfacree and Rivera 2012: 92). In this paper, we respond to this call. We focus on newcomers who moved to a rural area of the Netherlands at the family formation life stage.

We view the process by which newcomers become stayers through the lenses of place attachment and home making. Groups such as our middle class newcomers seek out residential places in enchanted

landscapes: in other words, they elect to belong to particular locations. Middle-class residents also tend to follow strategies of selective belonging to their neighbourhood. They adopt various practices of selective place-making, not (only) spatially selective, but (also) selective in terms of the meaning or representations of their place of residence (Benson and Jackson, 2012). We adopt the concepts of 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2005) and 'selective belonging' (Watt, 2009) in order to explore the ways rural newcomer families become stayers.

Based on the newcomers' experiences we examine perceived positive and negative aspects of rural life, and how these experiences interrelate with the practice of staying. In line with place attachment theories, we further distinguish between attachment to the physical and to the social rural environment (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001).

METHODS

Twelve newcomer couples were interviewed who all had moved to the rural northern Netherlands 5 to 10 years prior to the interview. At the time of moving, all were in the family formation life course stage. Respondents were recruited as a follow-up from the newcomers research project by Bijker et al. (2013) that took place in 2009 and 2010. The semi-structured and digitally recorded interviews lasted 60-90 minutes. They intended to address the newcomers' daily life experiences, feelings of attachment and belonging to the countryside, and if and how they perceived themselves to have become rural stayers.

The interviews took a biographical perspective, acknowledging that (non)migration processes are rooted in multifaceted and multi-layered everyday lives, and that they are instigated by multiple reasons (see Halfacree & Rivera, 2012). We combined deductive and inductive processes to develop a coding structure, building our categories partly on the interview questions and partly on the data. We used Atlas.ti to organise and code our data, but during

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the analysis phases we switched between the Atlas.ti codes and the original full transcripts to ensure that the richness of transcripts did not get lost.

RESULTS

When they initially moved, our respondents had no definite expectations of staying in the rural. All reported that they moved with the intention of 'we'll see how it pans out, we might stay a year, five years or longer'. They were not committed to staying from the outset. However, at the time of interview, when respondents were asked whether or not they had plans to stay or leave the village or the rural in the (near) future, nine couples claimed to have become 'convinced stayers' and three couples are classified as 'children-led stayers'.

The 'convinced stayers' expect to stay in the rural for as long as they can imagine. Most had moved to the countryside for lifestyle reasons, and possessed roots in the countryside and/or in the specific region they moved to. Most 'convinced' couples expect that life course changes such as becoming elderly and (potentially) less mobile may result in a re-negotiation of their staying process. Some anticipate a residential move towards either a larger village or a town with more facilities and services.

The three children-led stayer couples expect that child-related life course events will change their views on staying drastically. Two of the three couples moved to the countryside to offer the children a pleasant youth, the third moved for rural lifestyle reasons. Among children-led stayers the transition to an empty-nest life phase (when the children leave home) is expected to act as a trigger for re-negotiating the decision to stay.

Both groups are electing to belong in the rural for the time it suits their individual and family wishes. It also seems that because of these couples' earlier mobility histories, re-negotiating the decision to stay or move again is the logical thing to do.

Our newcomers identified with both the physical and social aspects of rural living. They appreciated typically rural idyll-like characteristics such as peace and quiet, natural qualities, relaxed lifestyle, and friendly and inclusive community. Disadvantages of the physical environment, such as the longer distances involved and the lack of diversity in facilities, were taken for granted because they did not outbalance the pros of staying. They now 'identify with' the rural place which has become meaningful to them. They elect to belong there.

However, we also found processes of selectivity in the way our newcomers developed strategies regarding rural community life. One strategy involved a conscious effort of the newcomers to adapt

attitudes and the way they performed in order to get connected to, and accepted within, the local community. This seems to be a s/elective way of 'identifying with' rural community life, that is mainly found in the convinced stayers group. Two other forms of selectivity go hand in hand with processes of 'identifying against' some of the social aspects of rural living. First, children-led stayers seek only to become involved in (or 'identify with') child-related activities and only for as long as their children are active in village life. Second, both children-led and convinced stayers 'identify against' certain elements of local culture and of the real rural stayers: that is, the local residents who have lived all their lives in the rural community.

CONCLUSION

Newcomer stayers have 'elected' to move to a rural environment but also have 'selected' to belong to a sub-section of the rural community conducive to their life stage. Both elective and selective strategies of belonging go hand in hand with the process of becoming a stayer, either for the short or for the longer term. S/electively belonging to a place keeps the 'escape' option of leaving open, when changes in life stage occur. One might go as far as to say that some newcomer stayers, especially children-led stayers, have failed to, or are unwilling to, develop anything other than a superficial sense of belonging: instead what has emerged is an 'elective residence': they have elected to reside in the rural (for now) but not elected to belong to the rural.

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